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ABSTRACT

Possible ways of conducting research examining the changing context of workplace basic skills policy in the United Kingdom were explored. First, workplace literacy was examined from the perspective of its role in the U.K. government's lifelong learning agenda, and existing research in workplace literacy policy and related studies were reviewed. Next, a framework for research on workplace literacy policy in the United Kingdom was presented. The framework included eight areas (termed "research options") where decisions must be made when choosing to research workplace literacy policy. The research options and selected examples of each are as follows: (1) focus (policy documents, policymakers, training providers, employers, workplace literacy students, unions, other agencies); (2) aspect (legitimacy, implementation); (3) perspective (feminist, deconstructionist, literacy as social practice, discourse analysis); (4) method (textual analysis, questionnaire/survey, interview, focus group, case study); (5) overview (historical, comparative, contemporary, longitudinal); (6) themes (curriculum, funding, accreditation, entitlement, benefits/barriers, tutor training/professional development; progression, information and computer technology, workplace change); (7) purpose (to challenge, influence, inform, monitor, develop theory, or evaluate); and (8) audience (policymakers, academics/researchers/policy analysts, workplace literacy practitioners, employers, workplace literacy students, material developers). Each of the options and examples was discussed, and two possible methods of combining the various examples of each option were described. (41 references) (MN)

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Researching Workplace Basic Skills Policy in the UK - ways, and means, to an end: Towards a comprehensive model of research methodologies.

Fiona Frank

March 2000

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Abstract

In this paper I look at some possible ways in which research could be carried out into the changing context of workplace basic skills policy in the UK. After a brief introduction into the area, and a short literature review, I attempt to set out a comprehensive framework for the planning and implementation of research in this area, taking note of the likely *audiences* as well as the possible different *foci* of the research, the range of different *perspectives* that could be taken, the different *methodologies* which could be used, the different *overviews* which could be taken within the research, the *issues* which could form the 'sub-themes' of the research, and the likely *purposes* of this type of research. A very brief discussion of ethical issues is included. Examples of research projects in related areas using some of these different foci and methodologies are touched on, with a brief discussion of the advantages and disadvantages in those foci and methods. Finally, I make two suggestions for ways in which it would be useful to investigate this area.

1. Background: workplace literacy as part of the Government's Lifelong Learning Agenda

At the time of writing, as we move into the twenty-first century, Workplace Basic Skills in the UK is a rapidly changing policy area, with new developments, new consultation exercises, and, more importantly, new **money** available for training providers, Trade Unions, consultants, materials developers, and Workplace Basic Skills network organisers.

An important part of this process has been the work of the Working Group on Post Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy' (Moser 1999). This report can be viewed in the context of the Government's Lifelong Learning Agenda, which follows on from the previous government's commitment to adult education demonstrated by the Tomlinson and Kennedy reports of 1996 and 1997 (Tomlinson, 1996 and Kennedy, 1997), and the current government's *'Learning for the 21st Century'*, the report of the National Advisory Group on Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning, NAGCELL published in 1997 (Fryer, 1997), and its Green Paper, *The Learning Age* published in 1998 (DfEE 1998). The White Paper *Learning to Succeed* which followed the Moser Report ((DfEE 1999) forms the final cornerstone of 1999 of the Lifelong Learning agenda, making sweeping changes to the structure and funding of adult education in the 21st Century.

The Government is in the process of developing new literacy standards, a new curriculum, new training pathways for tutors, a range of possible new incentives for

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employers, a new national Literacy Test, and strong links between IT and basic skills, as part of a new National Adult Literacy Strategy.

We are interested here in how literacy in the workplace is taking its place as a part of the Government's Lifelong Learning Agenda.

The new Adult Literacy Strategy is strongly based on the recommendations of the Moser Report. Many of these concern the development of basic skills in the workplace, including the setting up of a Workplace Basic Skills Development Fund, the integration of basic skills into the Investors in People standard, and more involvement for trade unions. The report also included a recommendation for day release for workplace basic skills training schemes.

2. Developing a research agenda

In this paper I look at some possible ways in which research could be carried out into the changing context of workplace basic skills policy in the UK. I attempt to set out a comprehensive framework for the planning and implementation of research in this area, taking note of the likely *audiences* as well as the possible different *foci* of the research, the range of different *perspectives* that could be taken, the different *methodologies* which could be used, the different *overviews* which could be taken within the research, the *issues* which could form the 'sub-themes' of the research, and the likely *purposes* of this type of research. A discussion of ethical issues is included.

In Table 1 below, I attempt to lay out a schematic model of this framework, with a detailed key to how the different options included in the model could be interpreted by researchers in this field.

Combining the different research options set out in this model would provide an infinity of different ways in which to research workplace literacy policy, and it is therefore not possible in this context to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each possible combination. I have, therefore, outlined in section 9 two differing ways of researching the issue, with a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each methodology, and have also included a brief literature review, including some examples of other ways in which workplace literacy policy has been researched both in the UK and in other countries and settings.

3. Starting Points

In order to research an issue it is useful to be overt about one's own perspective and one's own starting point in the area.

My own *perspective* on the research comes from a strong commitment to workplace literacy programmes as providing access to 'education for empowerment' (O'Connor 1993 and others) whereby lowpaid workers can access all kinds of education opportunities, thereby providing them with a potential both to 'escape' from, and to understand their current position, and to participate to a greater extent in community, political and learning activities outside the workplace setting. As a member of the Lancaster Literacy Research Group, I am influenced by the 'New Literacy Studies' as described by Gee and others (See eg Barton and Hamilton 1988, Gee, 1999) which describes literacy as a social practice, used by a range of people with different literacy

'levels', in a range of social contexts - rather than primarily as an indicator of people's levels of education.

My research *focus* when looking at workplace literacy policy, would always be around questions such as 'how far does this policy allow workplace literacy programmes to be student-centred; how far can an approach to workplace literacy using this policy be centred around literacy as social practice and around the student as a whole person.' I would oppose an approach which was centred around the needs of business and using a 'deficiency model' of literacy. (Taylor 1993, and others)

My *starting point* in this area was in 1989, when I carried out a research project for an Open University diploma in post-compulsory education, looking at a workplace basic skills programme being carried out at Baxi Heating, Bamber Bridge, Preston.

In 1991 following on from that research, I was appointed to the post of Research Associate at CSET, the Centre for the Study of Education and Training at Lancaster University's Education Research department, to carry out a Leverhulme Trust funded research project into workplace basic skills training programmes. This research was in three parts: a telephone survey of employer attitudes to workplace basic skills programmes, case studies of workplace basic skills programmes in the North West of England, and a general study of the issues around workplace basic skills, which included an initial look at policy in the UK at the time. It led to the publication of a research report: *Not Just a Number: The role of basic skills programmes in the changing workplace* (Frank and Hamilton 1993).

Since then I have continued to be interested and involved in the area of workplace basic skills training, and have been instrumental in establishing the Workplace Basic Skills Network, a forum to help workplace literacy training providers share good practice and avoid reinventing the wheel, through professional development, regular seminars and bulletins, and provision of support and consultancy on promoting basic skills to industry.

The Network has recently been successful in gaining funding from the DfEE to fund its core work, in order to help to implement the National Literacy Strategy. The Network is now run by a Management Team of three. My role on this team is as Communications/Coordination manager, coordinating the Network's seminar and workshop programme and edit its bulletin, with part responsibility for consultancy and partnership projects, and an involvement in the Network's research programme.

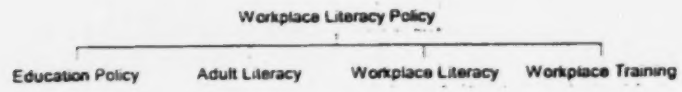
4. Ethical issues

The issue of one's salary being paid from a government department in order to help to implement an area of government policy is the first *ethical* issue raised in this paper. There could be a difficulty in publishing research potentially critical of one's funder, and a potential 'split personality' issue when one could conceivably be criticising a policy in one forum, and helping to implement it in another. It is helpful in these situations to maintain some independence, to draw funding from more than one source, and to check contracts carefully for 'exclusion clauses'.

5. Existing research in workplace literacy policy and related studies

Diagram 1 illustrates the fact that workplace literacy policy can be situated in different related research areas, and these are further discussed below.

Diagram 1: Workplace Literacy Policy: Related Research Areas for Literature Review



It is important to take a global view of research in workplace literacy policy. Even the smallest workplace works in a global setting, and as the world becomes smaller, researchers can travel the world (virtually and in reality) using international data sets easily obtained from international surveys, eg the IALS data, (OECD 1995), or questionnaires administered to an international audience by email and the world wide web (eg David Rosen's survey of literacy providers' and literacy students' use of the internet, sent out via the (US based) National Institute for Literacy listserve - (http:// http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/discussions.html), Chris Holland's MA research using a questionnaire survey of workplace literacy tutors in three countries (Holland 1999). Policymakers too are using the results of international research and practice to inform policy (viz. the use of the IALS data in the Moser Report, and the fact that evidence to the committee was submitted by Tom Sticht from the U.S.)

Centrally funded workplace basic skills programmes have been widespread in Australia and North America for at least the last decade (see for example Frank and Hamilton 1993 for an overview). Researchers such as Gee, Lankshear, Hull, and Gowen (Gowen 1992; Hull 1997), in those countries have published commentary and developed theory on workplace literacy policy and practice. An interesting study from the US (Sabatini 1997) uses the progress of one African American workplace literacy student over a three year period to illustrate how a case study approach can be used to influence policy. In Australia a study, 'More than Money can Buy' (Pearson 1996) used interviews, questionnaires and in-depth follow-up with more than 500 respondents (employers, union representatives and employees), and used five different measuring instruments, to measure the benefits to industry of workplace basic skills programmes. Meanwhile in a very different type of study, based on

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workplace ethnography, Maria-Alice Descardeci showed in her PhD thesis (Descardeci 1997) that literacy testing methods chosen by the Brazilian town council she studied were not related to literacy demands at the workplace, and failed to select satisfactory workers.

In the UK up to now, there has not been a rich field of research studies in workplace literacy. Ken Levine (Levine 1986), Jane Mace (Mace and Yarnit 1987, and Mace, 1994), and Brian Street (Street 1984) have written in the area. Chris Holland's unpublished MA (ibid) includes a section on workplace literacy policy in the UK, and my own Leverhulme Trust funded research project mentioned above (Frank and Hamilton 1993) includes a section on 200 years of history of workplace literacy in the UK, as well as more recent history and current policy issues. Quantitative studies in the UK of workplace literacy have included ALBSU surveys of employers (ALBSU 1993a and 1993b). Another survey, also sponsored by ALBSU, looked at employers' perceptions of the cost of employees' lack of literacy to their businesses (ALBSU 1993c). Among other publications, an international literature review on workplace literacy (Holland et al. 1998) gives a useful overview of current theories and debate on workplace literacy internationally.

In addition to studies on workplace literacy, general studies on adult literacy policy, and adult literacy in general, have something to offer to the researcher looking at *workplace* literacy policy. As far as more general studies of adult literacy go, Mary Hamilton's historical study of adult literacy policy in the UK provides an important overview (Hamilton 1996). David Barton and Mary Hamilton's study (Barton and Hamilton 1988) in one small community on the wide range of literacy practices carried out by people without highly defined literacy skills changes the focus from literacy in the educational field (where its opposition is 'lack of literacy') to literacy as a social practice (where its opposition may be 'oracy as a social practice').

An international collection of articles on adult literacy policy with a cross-disciplinary focus, edited by Peter Freebody and Anthony Welch (Freebody and Welch 1993), overturns any ideas of being able to take an 'idealogically neutral' attitude to literacy education.

And the 'Social Uses of Literacy' project, a book edited by Mastin Prinsloo and Mignonne Breuer (Prinsloo & Breuer 1996), provides a "challenge to an assumption in education policy that those without schooling represent a homogeneous and disabled group" (from an abstract in Hall, 1997)

It is also useful for the researcher in this field to consider studies on workplace education, not necessarily focussing on literacy, for example Keith Forrester, Kevin Ward and John Payne's publication which came out of the UFC funded 'Adult Learners at Work' research project looking at the role of Employee Development schemes in different workplaces (Forrester, Payne et al. 1995), and Victoria Marsick's study of workplace learning (Marsick 1987).

The literature from the general area of education policy studies is also useful. One way of looking at policy is after Saunders (Saunders 1986) for example, who talks about an 'implementation staircase' (very clearly illustrated in Trowler, (1998)) where policy may begin at the point of formulation, and 'progresses through the various stages of reception and implementation by the actors involved at different locations on the 'implementation staircase''. (Trowler, op cit).

An older study lists "five properties of policies that bear systematic attention: policy specificity, policy legitimacy, policy effectiveness, policy efficiency and policy evaluation." (Coombs 1980, quoted in Kirst and Hancock 1983).

A fuller literature search in this area could, for example, consider many of the 183 examples thrown up by the ERIC database when the keywords 'Workplace Literacy' and 'Policy' are requested, as well as look further into the references in the international bibliography mentioned above.

6. Research Methodology for examining workplace literacy

The table overleaf sets out a range of 'research options' which the researcher in workplace literacy in the UK needs to take into account when considering an approach to this topic. This is arranged in seven sections, by Focus, Aspect, Perspective, Method, Overview, Themes, Purpose and Audience. The researcher would, consciously or not, choose one or more examples from the range given for each option. An explanation of each section and each example is included below in section 7, and some examples of how to use the table to choose a methodology of investigating workplace literacy are given.

Table One: a framework for research on workplace literacy policy in the UK

Research Options	Examples								
1. **Focus**	Policy documents	Policy makers	Training Providers (managers)	Training providers (tutors)	Employers	Workplace Literacy students	Trade Unions	Other agencies	
2. **Aspect**	Legitimacy	Implementation							
3. **Perspective**	Feminist	Deconstructionalist	Literacy as social practice (whole person approach vs. competitiveness)	discourse analysis					
4. **Method**	Textual analysis	questionnaire/survey	interview	focus group	case study				
5. **Overview**	Historical	Comparative (across countries)	contemporary	longitudinal					
6. **Themes**	Curriculum	Funding	Accreditation	Entitlement/Release	Benefits/barriers	Tutor Training/ professional development	Progression	I.C.T.	workplace change
7. **Purpose: to**	Challenge	Influence	Inform	Monitor	Develop theory	evaluation			
8. **Audience**	Policy makers	Academics/researchers/ policy analysits	Workplace literacy practitioners	Employers	Workplace literacy students	ICT materials developers			

The examples given for each research option are not exclusive, and this is symbolised by the inclusion of at least one blank column at the end of the table.

7. Using the Table

The table sets out a range of decisions which have to be made when choosing to research workplace literacy policy. Within each row, a choice must be made: as to what Focus, Aspect, Perspective, Method, Overview, Themes, Purpose and Audience is planned by the writer.

In this section I 'unpack' each of the 'choices' in each row.

Focus

I have used the 'focus' of the research as meaning the main source from which the data for the research will be gathered. This can come from texts, or from different stakeholders: for example -

- Policy documents

The researcher can concentrate on policy documents themselves, for example just concentrating on the Moser Report, or taking a wider view and including the reports which preceded it (ie the Kennedy and Tomlinson Report, the Green Paper on Lifelong Learning and the report by the National Advisory Group and the White Paper *Learning to Succeed* which followed it (ops. cit). The DfEE and other government departments now have regularly maintained Web pages (http://www.lifelonglearning/co.uk and others) which include downloadable versions of policy documents.

- Policy makers

With a focus on policy *makers* themselves, the researcher could for example seek to carry out interviews with the members of the Moser Group, with members of the DfEE Basic Skills Section, with key personnel in the Basic Skills Agency, or with members of the Government, to find out how particular decisions were made and/or how the interviewees stand on those particular decisions.

- Training Providers (managers)

A focus on managers in training provider institutions (for example Further, Adult or Community education, or private training organisations), would lend itself well, for example, to a longitudinal survey on attitudes towards the government's Adult Literacy Strategy and how it concerns workplace literacy in particular. A large scale survey could be carried out, for example, with this group, or a series of regional focus groups, or a small series of interviews with one or two training providers.

- Training providers (tutors)

Workplace basic skills tutors could be included in research in various different ways. In addition to being a source of information (to be collected via questionnaire, interview, etc), being interested in their own professional development, this group is very likely to be interested in participant action research where they could be encouraged to develop their own research projects in the area, and their specific areas of interest would provide the data for an overall policy study.

- Employers

A large or small sample of employers, both participating and not participating in workplace literacy programmes, could be included in a study of workplace literacy policy. The point of view taken can either be that of the Managing Director, the Personnel/Training Department, or Production Manager: these roles may of course all rest within one individual in the case of a small business.

- Workplace Literacy students

The student view is not often taken into consideration in broad studies of literacy policy. Access to this group can be difficult, as they need to be approached through the tutor and also through the company. Individuals need to be assured that their confidentiality will be respected. Telephone interviews often need to be carried out in the evenings as access may not be granted for this kind of survey to take place during the working day (and there may not be an appropriate place to carry out interviews). Questionnaires may not be appropriate depending on literacy levels. The intervention of a third person (in the person of a researcher) may not be appropriate, so it may sometimes be more useful to conduct research with students through a tutor or trade union representative.

- Trade Unions

Trade Unions are more and more being involved in central policy on workplace basic skills in the UK. The TUC is a central player and individual unions are also involved in projects funded by the Union Learning Fund, a new fund set up by the government as part of the national basic skills strategy. Union representatives in companies as well as national and local representatives would all be key players in a research project.

- Other agencies

Agencies like the Basic Skills Agency, the National Literacy Trust, NIACE, the Campaign for Learning, the Ufl, and the Workplace Basic Skills Network all have a part to play in the formation of policy as well as opinions on the nature of policy, and could all be included as players in a research project.

Aspect

This section refers to which aspect of policy could be investigated.

- Legitimacy

The researcher could study the *legitimacy* of the policy (ie how far it is consistent with what has come before it, with what is demanded by stakeholders).

- Implementation

Alternatively, the researcher could study the *implementation* of the policy, looking at how far its 'letter' is being interpreted as 'action'.

Perspective

- Feminist

The researcher could look at how far the policy had specifically included the situation of women. This is particularly relevant in the case of release. If workers with caring responsibilities (mainly women) are expected to take up workplace literacy classes in their 'own time', then they are excluded from equal access to the sessions.

In writing about literacy from a feminist approach, writers such as Rockhill (Rockhill 1993) talk about the concept of 'literacy' as 'power': Rockhill discusses the concept of power as residing differently within men and within women. This can be taken more strongly into workplace literacy, taking into consideration the differences in the earning potential and employability of men and of women and the differences in access to learning of men and women.

- Deconstructionalist

Millard, (Millard 1995) quotes Jaques Derrida (Derrida 1982) as describing a deconstructionalist approach as 'turning against the edifices the instruments or stones available in the house' - i.e. in this case, looking inside the text of the policy to see, for example, whether the author/s are saying in the letter of the policy what they purport to be doing in the spirit of the policy. For example, using a deconstructionalist approach, the parts of 'Learning to Succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning' (The Stationery Office, London, 1999) which mention the 'broader benefits of learning' (providing the "chance to explore art, music and literature: it helps strengthen families and encourages independence." - p.55) can be contrasted with the 'real message' given by the pictures on the front page, which are all drawn from the world of work.

Millard (op cit) reminds us that

> "in discussions of education, literacy is always opposed to illiteracy rather than non-literacy, aliteracy, or, more radically, a different variant of literacy. Once the simplicity of such oppositions has been challenged it is possible to treat the accepted definition of literacy and the methods of teaching it, more critically than as the universal good it is usually assumed it must be."

and a deconstructionist approach to workplace literacy policy could look at whether the stated desired outcomes of the policy are actually 'universally desirable' - whether it is in fact unquestionable that it is a 'good thing' to introduce more adult literacy programmes within companies, for example.

- Literacy as social practice

As mentioned above, literacy doesn't have to be seen as something which is contrasted with 'lack of literacy'. In the work of Barton and Hamilton, and others (see for example Barton & Hamilton, 1988) literacy is seen as a set of changing social

practices - rather than something that some people 'have' and some people 'don't have' - with 'different literacies associated with different domains of life' and literacy practices seen as being 'purposeful and embedded in social goals and cultural practices.' In the workplace context, it could be seen whether the policy is likely to contribute to improved use of literacy in the wider domain of life, family and community as well as at the workplace.

- discourse analysis

In the very helpful glossary to 'Education Policy: A Policy Sociology approach' (Trowler 1998), Paul Trowler talks about Norman Fairclough's (Fairclough 1993) approach to discourse analysis in education: Fairclough discusses 'what happens when the language of business is used when discussing education' and how that use of language excludes other ways of 'conceptualising the educative process, eg in a more humanistic way which priorities personal development over effectiveness and efficiency.'. This would also be the case when the 'bottom line' of efficiency and reduction of errors is used as 'performance criteria' for a workplace literacy programme.

Research method

- Textual analysis

If using the policy texts as a focus for the research then a textual analysis research method would be used.

- questionnaire/survey

A large scale questionnaire survey, leading to quantitative data, would lend itself to use where the focus was on employers' attitudes to workplace basic skills policy. Basic skills tutors and College managers could also be surveyed using a questionnaire approach.

- interview

If the focus is students, policy makers or agencies, an interview approach would allow maximum flexibility and maximum responsiveness.

- Focus group

As well as providing useful data, research carried out using a focus group of, for example, employers in a local area, or basic skills tutors or managers - or a mixed group - would lead to increased activity in workplace basic skills as the group would gain from the interaction in ways which would be beyond the results of the research. (cross-fertilisation, exchange of ideas, possible new partnerships)

- case study

A case study of a workplace basic skills programme in action within a company - where the focus would include 'stakeholder perspectives' from students, tutors, supervisors, personnel, college managers and funders - would provide a useful 'action research' model with a focus on the implementation of policy.

- evaluation

An evaluation model used as the methodology for a research project on workplace basic skills policy would provide useful data for the policy-makers as well as for the researcher.

Overview

- Historical

A historical study of workplace literacy in the UK - over the last 200 years, for example (eg Frank, 1993) or over the last 10 years - provides an interesting contrast for current policy moves, and puts the current policy into focus.

- Comparative (across countries)

Looking at how other countries have developed policy on workplace literacy and what policy has been developed - using any of the foci outlined above - is a particularly useful way of informing current research and policy in the UK.

- contemporary

A 'snapshot' of current policy initiatives on workplace literacy and how they are being carried out 'on the ground'.

- longitudinal

A longitudinal study in this field could for example take groups of students 'before' 'during' and 'after' a workplace basic skills programme, to study their progress: or a company before and after a programme, to discuss impact on workplace change or other criteria.

Themes

- Curriculum

The workplace literacy curriculum reflects policy - it can be on a continuum from 'company centred' to 'student centred'.

- Funding

The sources of funding, the difficulty or ease of obtaining funding, is fundamental to the implementation of any policy.

- Accreditation

A new system of qualifications is being introduced as part of the government's adult literacy strategy, and student qualifications in basic skills is an important issue within this strategy: though sometimes companies' needs on qualifications does not resemble the college's.

- Entitlement

The research could cover who within a company is entitled to receive this type of training

- Release

... and whether they have to take it in their own time or in the companies' time: if in their own time, is it paid? - if in the company, is the time covered or do the students have to make up their work on return from the class?

- Tutor Training/ professional development

Issues which could form the basis of a research project on UK workplace basic skills policy would look at the new Teacher Training qualifications framework, and how far basic skills practitioners will be trained to work in the particular context of the workplace.

- Progression

Possibly as part of a longitudinal study, the research could look at where (and whether) the students went on after their initial study.

- ICT

The impact of ICT on this area of work is enormous and would repay a long study, taking into account the Ufl/learndirect as well as the vast amount of free Internet providers, and the falling cost of computers.

- Workplace change

If a prime purpose for companies in introducing basic skills programmes is to cope with change, then it would be useful to focus on the 'change' and see how the training and the policy has helped (or otherwise) with the 'change'.

Purpose

It would be important to look at what the purpose of the research would be. It could be any of the following:

- Challenge

to challenge policy

- Influence

to influence policy makers

- Inform

to inform practitioners, for example, on what's going on in current policy - the work would need to be published somewhere accessible.

- Monitor

to see if the policy is progressing as promised in 'The Learning Age' and the Moser report.

- Develop theory

to add to the canon of theory about this topic.

The *purpose* of the research is very strongly linked to its likely *audience*:

Audience

- Policy makers

This audience would be one to approach if the purpose was to influence or challenge

- Academics/researchers/ policy analyists

would be the audience for a more academic work.

- Workplace literacy practitioners

To keep them informed

- Employers

For awareness raising

- Workplace literacy students

To make them feel more part of a wider 'community' of workplace learners.

- ICT materials developers

There is a lot of activity involved currently in developing IT materials for adult basic skills students. This process could be monitored in the research project.

Overview

As one method of investigating workplace literacy policy, for example, just using the first column of the table, a study could focus on *policy documents*, looking specifically at their *legitimacy*, from a *feminist* perspective, using *textual analysis* as a research method, with a *historical* overview, concentrating on the theme of how the workplace literacy *curriculum* has changed over time. This study could be mainly written with the purpose of *challenging* the actions of *policymakers*, the primary audience for this particular study.

Of course the vertical columns are not exclusive, and another study could focus on *employers'* views of UK workplace literacy policy (column 5), focusing on how the policy is being *implemented* (col. 2) using a *social practice* perspective (col. 3), collecting the data by means of *focus groups* (col. 4), taking a *comparative* overview by carrying out similar focus group discussions in three countries (column 2), concentrating particularly on the workplace literacy curriculum (col. 1), and seeking to develop theory (col. 5) primarily for an audience of researchers and policy analyists. (column 2). Yet another study could use a combination of research methods, for example using a *case study* approach and conducting *focus group* discussions with workplace literacy *students*, and *interviews* with workplace literacy *tutors*, concentrating mainly on the issue of *progression*, and seeking primarily to *inform employers*. (These are just suggested as random examples of how the table above could be used. In section 9, I set out in more detail two ways in which I propose it would be useful to research UK workplace literacy policy in more detail, with notes about the advantages and disadvantages of these different ways of

proceeding with the research. A general note about advantages and disadvantages of these ways of working precedes that section.

8. Advantages and Disadvantages of different research methods

In looking at research methodology in this schematic way, it can be seen that the advantages and disadvantages of a particular research method is very much tied to the desired purpose and the hoped-for audience. For example, the 'Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy Skills in the Workplace' research report (Bloom, Burrows et al. 1997) has many advantages for its purpose: to show business in Canada that it is worth taking up this type of training. For this purpose, a survey of employers, with a prior overview of policy documents, focussing on benefits and barriers, was ideal. However, this research did not include the views or experiences of workplace literacy students, and expanding the survey to include the students' views could have persuaded **employees** too that it was worth taking up this type of training.

9. Two proposed examples of methodology for researching workplace basic skills

I propose below, two ways in which it would be useful to carry out research in UK workplace literacy policy at this very interesting time. Space does not allow a full analysis of these two methodologies but they are both focuses which build on existing links and would repay further investigation.

Project One

Using as a focus a case study of a geographical area - a county where a special funded workplace basic skills programme has taken place across 6 colleges - interviews would be carried out and focus groups would be held, with samples of tutors, College project managers, and employers, across the region. These interviews and focus groups would look at the implementation of the policy, from a social practice perspective, and would include the themes of benefits and barriers, tutor training, and workplace change.

The project would seek to inform policy makers of practitioner and employer viewpoints.

Advantages of this method include ease of access (the group is already in existence and work is being done). Disadvantages would include the fact that focus groups seeking to gain the views of different employers and different colleges might not be fully effective if individuals were concerned about competitiveness and

confidentiality. In addition, the stop-start nature of project funding means that at the end of the period of funding, the work is not guaranteed to be sustained.

Project Two

This more ambitious project would focus on a small number of workplace literacy *students* across three European countries (eg France, England and Holland) and three other English speaking western industrialised countries (eg Canada, Australia and the US). Taking as 'case studies' the individual students in the different workplaces in the different countries, via interviews with the students and their tutors and employers, and focussing on the curriculum and possibly on the use of ICT, it would look at how responsive to the students' own situation the policies of the different countries were, looking at legitimacy as well as at implementation. This would have a purpose of challenging policymakers, with an audience of policymakers as well as researchers and practitioners.

The advantages of this methodology would be that it would be a new way of looking at the issue, and would throw up some comparative indicators which have not so far been noted: the comparative factor would be useful for the English environment, and it would be useful for the other countries involved too. Funding could be available for the European part of the work through the new Leonardo da Vinci programme.

The disadvantages would be that it would be very heavy on resources, and access would be complicated to arrange despite existing links through the Workplace Basic Skills Network's European project partnerships and other partnerships. Language would be an issue as would finding suitable students in the different countries.

10. Final comments and conclusions

Space does not allow a fuller consideration of each of these potential projects. It can however be seen that workplace literacy policy in the UK is a rich field of study, and that this piece of work has done no more than skirt the whole field - a deeper study into any of the areas listed above would repay the time given to it, and the interest currently shown in the field by the government means that there are currently funds available for the right research and evaluation projects carried out by the right research and evaluation unit.

It is also important to note that there are always different perspectives and different options available when setting out to do research on any given topic. For the researcher, it is useful to spend time examining the desired outcome and audience for the proposed research, and to look at different possibilities for research methodology rather than immediately settling on the most obvious. For the reader, a framework for analysing how a research project into this area has been designed is useful: not all research projects will fit into this framework but it provides a way of helping the reader to examine the researcher's starting points, perspectives and motivation.

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